# Contextualizing and Exploring the Charter School System

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## Background

One opposing system to an equitable society is a power hierarchy. The education system is no exception. Education intends to pass on knowledge, create informed and responsible citizens, and drive innovation. Yet, despite the ultimate good and impact education can create, systems of power dictate, delineate, and shape who engages in the system and the makeup of learning experiences. The charter school system, or a public-school option where community members design and open a school for specific community-based needs, attempts to disrupt the power hierarchy education creates by addressing the inequities of a community. Charter schools often times are designed for in-need populations and serve historically marginalized communities. However, the success of a charter venture is fueled like a capitalist system with the funding contingent upon student success and ventures initiated by dedicated communities. The charter system has the potential to disrupt the power hierarchy prevalent in perpetuating inequity in education and act as a model for change; however, inception stems from capitalist policy which passes off the responsibility of government creating equity into the hands of communities. Through the examination of the charter school system design through case studies and the contextualization of the system demonstrates their positive potential of a user-centered education system design.

Born in the 1980s, the charter school system arose in response to a historically inequitable education system. The '80s saw the end of the Cold War, an economic recession, and shifting international geopolitical power. Such changing dynamics created uncertainty amongst Americans, and as change rarely comes without resistance, the election of Ronald Reagan represented a conservative attempt at restoration (Cohen, 1991; Fand, 1981; Heclo, 2008). As part of these restorative efforts, Reagan's Secretary of Education, Terrel H. Bell, commissioned the National Commission on Excellence in Education Report (Ravitch, 1990). The report was published by 1983 and its goal was to study the state of American education as well as make the results as accessible to the public as possible. The report describes its mission as:

> All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair
> chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to
> the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts,
> competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgement needed
> to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not
> only their own interests but also the progress of society itself. (The National
> Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 4)

The report sought to examine the current state of United States education systems. From the report, the Department of Education concluded that the United States was "A Nation at Risk" (A Nation at Risk, 1983). The Nation at Risk findings spread rapidly across news headlines, researchers, policymakers, and to the presidential office. Research was also done comparatively as fears regarding American power and intellectual competitiveness were perpetuated. Figure 1 demonstrates a comparative report that was submitted to the National Commission of Excellence in Education. The report found the United States was comparatively lagging behind Russia in the amount of STEM degrees produced (Catherine & Rushing, 1982). The nature of this report illustrates the palpable fears plaguing researchers and policy makers during the 80s and sets the stage for later reform movements (Catherine & Rushing, 1982). Moreover, in a radio address, President Reagan said, "our education system, once the finest in the world, is in a sorry state of disrepair" (Reagan, 1983, line 3). President Reagan blamed bureaucratic policies for stifling achievement levels and urged parents and students to initiate grassroots reform. His radio address implored action from the citizen and demanded change. The renewed interest in education reform and accountability arose out of international fears and a shifting geopolitical power and quickly seized the nations' interest.
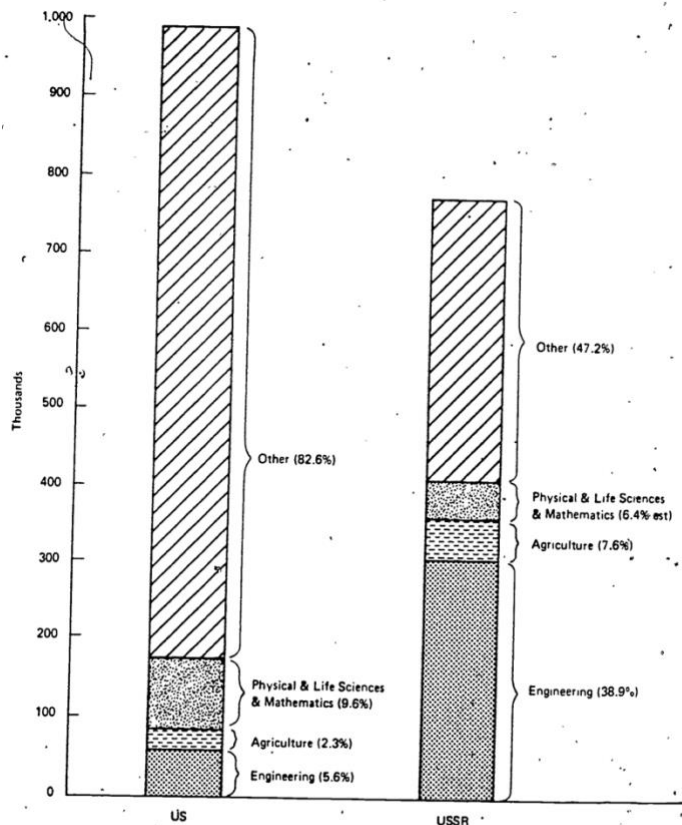
Source: <u>National Economy of the USSR in 1979; Earned Degrees Conferred, 1977-78, Summary Data</u>, National Center for Educational Statistics.

Figure 5    U.S. BACHELOR'S DEGREES AND U.S.S.R. DIPLOMAS CONFERRED, BY MAJOR FIELD OF STUDY, 1978

FIGURE 1. U.S. Bachelor's degrees and U.S.S.R. diplomas conferred by major field of study. The U.S.S.R. was ahead of the U.S. in producing STEM related degrees. (Catherine & Rushing, 1982)

Consequently, the design for charter schools arose from American capitalist ideals of competition and the declining geopolitical power of the United States. As a result of "all the studies and reports of the 1980s," Ray Budde, the designer of the charter school concept, published his idea in 1988, five years after the Nation at Risk report was announced (Budde, 1988, p. 72). In Budde's conceptual model, the system would work as a privately operated educational entity that is publicly funded (Garcia & Garcia, 1996). Any community member could propose a plan for a charter to their local district (Malloy, 2000). The form afforded dedicated educators to serve a particular student population, experiment with innovative pedagogical methods, and create new schooling experiences open for public enrollment. Feedback through student performance,

teacher/parent reports, and other accountability measures would determine the venture's success (Budde, 1988). Budde believed the charter school system would catalyze student performance because community members had a direct stake in their school, and competition between charter and public schools would motivate success (Budde, 1988).

In 1991 Minnesota became the first state to implement charter school legislation, and it quickly gained popularity amongst citizens and politicians (Budde, 1996). Interest in charters compounded as previous frustrations with education persisted, Reagan's recent calls for reform incited interest, and early ventures saw success. However, for politicians, the system was more of a means to an end to please constituents and increase ratings; their motivation was not solely to improve the educational inequities. Furthermore, as states ratified charters, it cunningly redirected the responsibility of educational reform to communities now responsible for their ventures' success and improving their educational outputs. Renzulli and Roscigno (2005) found a domino effect between 1991 and 1999: states adopting legislation had neighboring states with successful charters, which led to citizens advocating to their representatives for legislative reform. Though the motivation for state legislatures' adoption of the system was politically-driven, it allowed for the widespread implementation of charter schools.

## Case Study: Jefferson Charter School

The charter school system in itself afforded creativity and autonomy to dedicated educators, parents, and community members who would design for specific student populations. A case study of the Jefferson Charter School (JCS), the first charter school in Louisiana, elucidates an instance where user-centered design in charters allowed for equity. JCS was an alternate option school designed for middle school students expelled from public school. The JCS designers found a need: youth expelled had no alternative schooling option leading to falling behind, and if returned to school the following year, often became repeat offenders. JCS, therefore, emphasized a developmentally appropriate approach to rehabilitate students' behavioral difficulties and academic progression (Kirby, 1999).

To fulfill its mission of serving its student population, the founding members meticulously harmonized the school's pedological and cultural design with student needs. Carefully hired school staff formed educator teams that jointly constructed curriculum and extracurriculars aimed at whole child education. Whole child education is the concept that education should seek to enrich "social, emotional, mental, physical as well as cognitive development of students" (Slade & Griffith, 2013). The faculty also had students work closely with an adult mentor throughout the year. Mentors encouraged and supported students' personal and academic development and also exemplified various career paths. Further, to accommodate the student-centered pedagogy, there was an extended

school day. A later start and ending time afforded students more sleep and occupied students during the afternoon, the notorious time period where students were known to get into trouble outside of school. Blocked scheduling liberated educators from the time pressures of traditional instruction. Such an approach emphasized deep learning and cultivating a remarkable classroom experience (Kirby, 1999).

In the curriculum design, educators approached traditional subjects with a more student-centered approach by integrating classroom technology, being mindful of homework, stress, mental and physical health, and creating hands-on lessons. A specific measure taken to increase student engagement was devoting a block of time to career exploration. Students were not only planning for their future, but it brought a sense of utility into the classroom curriculum to foster engagement. For example, learning about the body systems in science was no longer because a teacher commanded it or to pass a test, but because it could lead to developing critical thinking skills, a future career in research, health care, or applied knowledge in other career paths (Kirby, 1999). State-wide and charter-system-specific exams along with student behavior reports kept JCS school accountable for their use of public funding. After a year in session, the goals of high retention, accelerated curriculum, safe environment, psychological and behavioral support were attained with the evaluation criteria seen in Figure 2 (Kirby, 1999, p. 17-22). The design arose out of a specific need with completely user-centered decisions. The school-culture rehabilitated, supported, and altered the lives of students Louisiana legislation had previously predetermined unworthy. Such careful design to bring utility into the classroom and support each student is part of the design form that cultivated a new educational experience (Kirby, 1999).

| The Evaluation Criteria Established for the Charter School | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1996-97 | 1997-98 | 1998-99 | 1999-2000 | 2000-01 |
| LEAP 7th Grade | | | | | 80% above state cutoff |
| Promotion from 8th to 9th grade | | | 80% of students who attended JCS at least one year | 80% of students who attended JCS at least one year | 80% of students who attended JCS at least one year |
| Dropout Rate | | | | | below JPPS % for students at same CAT quartile |
| CAT | Continuous progress by 80% of students at lowest quartile | Continuous progress by 80% of students at lowest quartile | Continuous progress by 80% of students at lowest quartile | Continuous progress by 80% of students at lowest quartile | Continuous progress by 80% of students at lowest quartile |
| High school completion | | | | | equivalent to dictrict's rate |

Note: Failure to meet the above–stated performance criteria may result in revocation or non–renewal of the charter by the Jefferson Parish Public School Board in accordance with R.S. 17:3975 (P) (2), 1995.

FIGURE 2. Evaluation criteria for the JCS (Kirby, 1999).

There are critics of the charter school system who point to shortcomings in accountability and the extent to which it is responsible for improved academic performance (Good & Braden, 2000). Critics also argue that charters may funnel funding from already tight public-school budgets. However, on a broader scale of education equity initiatives, charter schools serving urban, low-income, and minority students produce "test-score gains that are equivalent to the size of the US black-white achievement gap" (Cohodes, 2018, p. 6). Another study in 2004 from the National Bureau of Economic Research found that when comparing elementary students' math and reading achievement between all charter and public schools, students were "5.2 percent more likely to be proficient in reading and 3.2 percent more likely to be proficient in math on their state's exams" in a charter school (Hoxby, 2004). Furthermore, these results were contingent upon the amount of funding, length of charter schools' operation, and controlled for schools targeting already gifted students (Hoxby, 2004). Therefore, in the hands of dedicated and virtuous designers, charters can alter students' academic and later life trajectory. A part of the achievement of the ventures stems from those charter schools that are built with a user-center design with pedagogy tailored to match specific inequities and address student needs. As seen in the case of the user-centered design in JCS, the flexibility offered in the charter school system allows the school to align students', families', and communities'

needs into the ventures and has the potential to increases the success of the schools (Almond, 2021; Yeager et al., 2019). Thus, charter schools have potential to be a great equalizer and work on closing the white-black achievement gap, if the criticisms of accountability are met and the system refined.

Conclusion

The design context of charter schools was a means to a political end in America during the 80s and 90s; however, the charter school system can be an end-in-itself experience for students when designed in a user-centered fashion addressing population specific needs, experimenting, and improving based on feedback. Power hierarchies may always exist to control the distribution of knowledge. The popularization of the system by politicians mainly served their careers interests and responded to constituent's dissatisfaction and the fears at the time. Despite the bureaucratic roll-out, citizens seized the opportunity to design specific and good change. When put in the right hands, such as the Jefferson Charter School case, unleashing student potential and cultivating fulfilling and positive experiences unfolds. Charter systems within the larger education system illustrate the potential for education to be an equalizer within the United States.

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